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## PRINCE HENRY OF PRUSSIA AND THE REGENCY OF THE UNITED STATES, 1786<sup>1</sup>

WITH the name of General von Steuben, whose monument was unveiled with great ceremony in Washington in December, 1910, is connected the memory of a little-known episode in the constitutional history of the United States. Steuben's biographer, the German-American historian, Friedrich Kapp, makes the following statement regarding it:<sup>2</sup>

When, before the adoption of the present Constitution, in a circle of his friends, the question of the form of the government was discussed and it was not yet decided whether the President was to be vested only with the authority of the highest civil officer or with the more princely privileges of the Dutch stadtholder, one of the party, addressing himself to Steuben, asked whether Prince Henry of Prussia would be willing to accept an invitation, and whether he would make a good President. Steuben answered, "As far as I know the prince he would never think of crossing the ocean to be your master. I wrote to him a good while ago what kind of fellows you are; he would not have the patience to stay three days among you."

This story of Kapp's is based upon oral communication from a certain John W. Mulligan, who, from 1790 until the death of Steuben in 1794, had been the latter's confidential secretary and companion. At the time of the appearance of Kapp's book he counted more than eighty years, but he is described by that author explicitly as an old man of remarkable freshness and as a trustworthy witness.

It is well known that throughout many years a friendly relationship existed between Prince Henry, the brother of Frederick the Great, and Steuben. The latter had served in the Seven Years' War under the prince, had fought at Prague and Rossbach, and had taken part in the campaigns of 1759 and 1760 in the army of Henry, upon whose recommendation, after the close of the war, he had become *Hofmarschall* to the Prince of Hohenzollern-Hechingen. The prince, it is true, had had no part in the decision of Steuben to go to America and offer his services to the colonies fighting for their independence. There occurred, indeed, a long pause in their mutual

<sup>1</sup> Article sent to the REVIEW by Dr. Richard Krauel, honorary professor in the University of Berlin, author of several books relating to Prince Henry of Prussia.

<sup>2</sup> Kapp, *Life of Steuben* (New York, 1859), p. 584; German edition, *Leben des Amerikanischen Generals F. W. von Steuben* (Berlin, 1858).

relations; it was not till 1785, two years after the Peace of Paris between Great Britain and the United States, that General Steuben again addressed a letter to Prince Henry. In this, invoking their earlier acquaintance, he recommended to him an American, "le Sieur Littlepage", who was journeying to Prussia.<sup>3</sup> Nothing is known regarding any continuation of the correspondence. Kapp, who went through the sixteen volumes of the Steuben papers preserved by the New York Historical Society, prints only a short and formal answer of the prince to that first letter of the general. No traces are preserved of a political correspondence concerning men and affairs in America, such as one might assume from the statement of Steuben transmitted by Mulligan.

On the other hand, in the remains of Steuben, who, after the end of the War of Independence, lived for a considerable time in New York and participated ardently in the politics of the day, various memoranda are to be found concerning the rights and prerogatives of the president in a republic, as also an historical survey of the duties of the head of the state in ancient and modern times. During that critical period of American history, when on account of the inadequacy of the Articles of Confederation the creation of a better constitution, with a strong and unified executive power, actively occupied men's minds, we may easily imagine that in the political discussions between Steuben and his friends, among whom men like Alexander Hamilton were numbered, such questions were frequently treated. It appears therefore quite possible that, on some such occasion, some one or other threw out casually the suggestion of choosing Prince Henry of Prussia for the highest position in a new federal government, and that Steuben thereupon gave the jocose answer mentioned.

On this presumption we should be dealing with an anecdote, which to be sure is characteristic of conditions and opinions in the United States at that time, but which could acquire historical significance only if it were proved that, earlier or later, actual steps were undertaken to summon Prince Henry to the head of the American government. While all evidence for this has been lacking up to a recent date, and one was entirely warranted in relegating to the realm of legend any such proposal—even as a passing incident—documents have now been published which compel us to pay greater attention to the Steuben narrative.

<sup>3</sup>In this letter, published by Kapp, p. 695, Steuben says: "I flatter myself that my military services in this hemisphere have made me not unworthy to claim the glory of having completed my apprenticeship under a prince who is admired not less in America than in the other parts of the world."

In the sixth volume of the *Life and Correspondence of Rufus King* it is stated that, in a letter to General Jackson, President Monroe expressed the opinion that various persons among the Federalists in the time of Washington had been adherents of monarchy. In connection with this we find printed the following memorandum of King:<sup>4</sup>

10<sup>th</sup> May 1824. Col. Miller this evening said to me, speaking of Mr. Pr[esident] Monroe, that he had told him that Mr. Gorham, formerly President of Congress, had written a letter to Prince Henry, brother of the great Frederic, desiring him to come to the U. S. to be their king, and that the Prince had declined by informing Mr. Gorham that the Americans had shown so much determination agt. their old King, that they wd. not readily submit to a new one; Mr. Monroe adding that Genl. Armstrong had given him this information and that the papers or correspondence was in the hands of General Hull.

We learn further that in the year 1825, in the course of a debate in the Senate, a hint was dropped that Rufus King had known about the plan to establish a monarchical form of government in the United States under Prince Henry, and that the attempt was made to exploit this charge in the interest of party politics, in order to prevent the appointment of King as minister to London. The matter seemed sufficiently important to prompt President John Quincy Adams as well as the Secretary of State, Henry Clay, to further inquiries, from which, however, no evidence whatsoever was produced of any participation of King in the "Prussian scheme". In a letter to Charles King, the son of Rufus, the President expressed the expectation "that henceforth Prince Henry of Prussia will be suffered to sleep in peace", and Clay conjectured that in the whole affair there was perhaps a confusion with a plan, which came to the surface during the Revolutionary War, in the years 1777 and 1778, to offer to Prince Henry the supreme command over the American troops.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the assertion remained unrefuted that the noted politician, Nathaniel Gorham, who as delegate of the state of Massachusetts together with Rufus King signed the Constitution of the United States, had in the year 1786, when he was president of the Continental Congress, written a letter to Prince Henry with the contents mentioned above. While according to the statement of Steuben

<sup>4</sup> King, VI. 643. See also *Writings of James Monroe*, V. 343 (letter to Jackson).

<sup>5</sup> *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, VII. 55-56, 63-64; King, VI. 644, 647. According to modern investigations, no such plan ever existed. It was rather the Count de Broglie who was thought of for the position of commander-in-chief. For particulars concerning this, see Wharton, *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence*, I. 391-396.

reported by Kapp, the candidacy of the Prussian prince was suggested only orally, and was put aside with a jest, one would now be driven to the conclusion that a written offer of a royal crown was made, and was declined by Henry. In view of the many considerations which militate against such an assumption, the historian was naturally inclined to hold his judgment in suspense, and wait to see whether the alleged correspondence between Gorham and the prince would be forthcoming.

Into the darkness which has accordingly been lying over this incident, a surprising light has now been shed through a discovery recently made in Germany. In the archives of the royal Prussian house (Hausarchiv) in Charlottenburg, where a part of the literary remains of Prince Henry is preserved, there has been found the autograph draft of a letter addressed by the prince to General Steuben, which refers to a proposed change in the constitution of the United States.

The text of this document, composed like all the letters of Henry in the French language, is here published for the first time:<sup>a</sup>

Monsieur de Stuben, général au service des États-Unis de l'Amérique. En Amérique au Hanôvre à 5 milles de New-York.

*Monsieur*

Votre lettre du 2 du mois 9<sup>bre</sup> m'est parvenue. Je l'ai reçue avec tout le sentiment de la reconnaissance mêlée de surprise. Vos bonnes intentions sont bien dignes de mon estime, elles me paraissent l'effet d'un zèle que je voudrais reconnaître, tandis que ma surprise est une suite des nouvelles que j'apprends par la lettre d'un de vos amis. J'avoue que je ne saurais croire qu'on pût se résoudre à changer les principes du gouvernement qu'on a établi dans les États-Unis de l'Amérique, mais si la nation entière se trouverait d'accord pour en établir d'autres, et choisirait pour son modèle la constitution d'Angleterre, d'après mon jugement je dois avouer que c'est de toutes les constitutions celle qui me paraît la plus parfaite. On a l'avantage que si, comme dans tous les établissements humains, il se trouve quelque chose de défectueux, qu'on pourrait le corriger et faire de si bonnes lois pour que la balance fût mieux établie entre le souverain et les sujets, sans que ni l'un ni les autres ne pussent jamais empiéter sur les droits alloués respectivement à chacun. Il ne m'est pas possible de vous envoyer un chiffre, vous comprenez qu'il courrait les hasards des lettres et se trouverait entre les mains de ceux qui s'en saisiraient les premiers. Je vais cet automne en France, peut-être y trouverais-je un de vos amis. Les Français sont jusqu'à cette heure les vrais alliés des États-Unis de l'Amérique. Il me paraît que rien de grand pourra solidement se faire chez vous, à moins d'y faire concourir cet allié. Cela suffit, Monsieur, pour vous

<sup>a</sup> Prince Henry had the habit of Gallicizing the names of his friends, as did Frederick the Great, who, for example, used always to write the name of his great opponent Prince *Conis*, instead of Kaunitz. The somewhat strange French orthography of the Prince has in the letter which follows been altered into accord with the mode of spelling now customary.

faire comprendre que c'est par ce canal que je pouvais recevoir à l'avenir les lettres que vous voudrez m'adresser.

En vous assurant que je désire ardemment de vous donner des preuves de l'estime avec laquelle je suis, Monsieur, votre très affectonné ami.

The writing is undated. A basis for establishing the date of its composition is offered, however, by the remark concerning an intended journey of the prince to France in the autumn. He was twice in France: the first time from August till November, 1784, the second in the winter of 1788-1789. The first journey certainly cannot be meant, because, as we know from Kapp's book, Steuben did not renew his correspondence with the prince until May, 1785. To date the letter in the year 1788 is likewise inadmissible, because the new constitution of the United States had already been determined in 1787. These difficulties are however removed by the fact that Henry, as is known from other information, had intended to make his second visit to France early in the autumn of 1787, but was afterward obliged, through various considerations, to postpone his departure for a year. Accordingly his answer to Steuben's letter must have been written in the first months of 1787. The date may be still more exactly determined, for the paper used bears a mourning border, which points to a bereavement in the royal family. In fact, a sister of Henry, the Princess Amalie of Prussia, had died on March 30, 1787, and as in such cases at that time the usual official period of mourning at the Prussian court lasted fourteen days, the first half of April, 1787, can with tolerable certainty be assumed for the composition of the document before us. For the letter of the second of November mentioned therein, which unfortunately has not yet been found, the year 1786 consequently presents itself—that is, the time when in the United States the call was resounding from all quarters for a new constitution in order to bring to an end the condition of public affairs (almost anarchic, according to a statement of Washington), which had set in after the War of Independence.

As to the contents of the prince's letter, we must first observe that the author, having in mind the possibility that it might fall into strange hands and be read by unbidden eyes, intentionally confines himself to indefinite and general phrases, without indicating clearly the actual pith of the affair concerning which his opinion was desired. Steuben had joined to his letter a writing by one of his American friends and it was the information contained in this document which, as the prince says, astonished him. It is plain from the remarks which follow, that this information must have related to a proposed

fundamental change in the constitution of the United States, in the accomplishment of which the prince will believe only if the whole nation is united in regard to it. The encomium here bestowed on the English constitution, as the most perfect among all, was usual with Prince Henry; he shows himself in this to have been, like many of his contemporaries, influenced by Montesquieu's *Esprit des Loïs*, in which the English parliamentary government, with a monarch at its apex, is represented as the ideal.

But what could impel Steuben and his friends to such a communication with a Prussian prince regarding the internal political affairs of the United States? There must surely have been reasons of a wholly confidential and personal nature, especially as the prince was asked to send over a cipher for the continuation of the correspondence. With what secret have we to do?

The conjecture lies near at hand, that the writing of his American friend transmitted by Steuben is identical with the writing of Nathaniel Gorham of the year 1786, wherein the latter, according to the memorandum of Rufus King, is said to have invited the prince to come to the United States as king, if the American people should decide to give themselves a constitution according to the English pattern. The carefully guarded expressions of the prince contain indeed no indication of the offer of a royal crown, nor do they coincide with the declaration of King, according to which the prince is said to have declined the offer on the ground that the Americans would hardly subject themselves to a new king after they had set themselves against their former monarch with so much determination. An indication of such a thought might perhaps be found in the remark of the prince that he could not believe the American nation would be found ready for a change of their present, *viz.*, republican, principles of government. Much significance also attaches to the advice contained in Henry's letter, that in any reorganization of American constitutional relations, regard should be had to the French, the faithful allies of the United States, without whose co-operation nothing great and permanent could be created there. If one is to venture at all upon the uncertain ground of an interpretation of this political oracle, he may conjecture that Henry was recommending, in the case of a monarchical restoration in the United States, the choice of a French candidate for the throne or at least of one agreeable to France, in order to ensure thereby the continuance of the Franco-American alliance. However fantastical such a combination may seem to us to-day, yet we must not overlook the fact that the American statesmen of that time had

constantly before their eyes the danger of new military complications with European powers, and that this reason was of great weight for the ultimate creation of a unified federal authority with comprehensive military and political powers.

Whatever the opinion may have been which Prince Henry wished to express in his reply to Steuben, and however the proposals may have read which came from Gorham or from those of like opinion with him, we must assume as certain that the correspondence lying before us was not continued. Even before the letter of the prince could have arrived in America, which under the conditions of intercourse at that time must have been nine or ten weeks after its dispatch, the Convention which was to determine the future constitution of the United States had on May 25, 1787, assembled in Philadelphia. No voice among its members was raised in favor of a monarchy. Alexander Hamilton indeed declared there that he looked upon the English constitution, in spite of all the corruption in the individual branches of the administration, as the most perfect pattern of government ever devised by human reason; but he immediately added that the mind of the American people was so thoroughly republican that the idea of introducing monarchy would be an idle dream—words which correspond exactly with the judgment of the Prussian prince in his correspondence with Steuben. It is well known that later, when the Convention had already decided for the title “President”, Hamilton made a further attempt to procure a princely status for the first officer of the republic, by proposing to appoint him for life, “subject to removal by impeachment”, whereby the presidency would, except for the exclusion of the hereditary principle, approximate to the office of stadtholder as maintained in the Republic of the United Netherlands. The proposition was rejected as undemocratic; we might perhaps designate it as the last echo of a state of mind in which intelligent and patriotic statesmen, in order to rescue the young American commonwealth from a complete collapse, devised the expedient of a return to monarchical institutions.

A fugitive trace of the idea, thus born in the stress of the moment, we recognize in the letter of Prince Henry which lies before us. While one might have attributed to the story told by Steuben merely the value of an anecdote without historical significance, and while the more definite statement of Rufus King encountered many doubts and left open the possibility of a misunderstanding or of the formation of a later legend, we have now the first unquestionable evidence that the supporters of a fundamental change in the constitution of the United States actually entered into correspondence



with Prince Henry. Steuben, as an acquaintance of the prince, played the part of go-between; perhaps it was he who turned the attention of his American friends, in their search for a suitable ruler for the United States, to this brother of Frederick the Great. In any case, Steuben knew more about the affair than he later saw fit to communicate to his secretary Mulligan. That the American writer of the letter which so astonished the prince was Nathaniel Gorham and that Gorham acted in a common understanding with his political party associates, can scarcely be doubted longer. The evidence furnished by Rufus King is supported by the discovery made in the Charlottenburg archives, although the latter does not quite afford a strict proof in the legal sense. In order to have full light thrown over this at least interesting episode in the early history of the constitution of the United States, it would be very gratifying if the text of Gorham's letter to Prince Henry, which, according to King's statement in 1824, was in the possession of General Hull in Massachusetts, could be rediscovered and made public.

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